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COURSE REDESIGN WITH STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIP: A REFLECTION ON OPPORTUNITIES AND VULNERABILITIES

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Course Redesign: Reasons, Purpose and Process

Several years ago, in partnership with two of my colleagues at Elon University, I decided to redesign a course in my discipline, Spanish language and Hispanic culture. My colleagues did the same in their respective disciplines. We collaborated with our students in order to engage in a dialogue about teaching and learning and, more importantly, to invite student voices into our conversations about pedagogy. In what follows, I describe the goals, the process, and the outcomes of my experience with student-faculty partnership on course (re)design, to later move to reflect on some of the opportunities, as well as risks and vulnerabilities involved in it.

My specific goals for this project were to revise an already existing course, then titled: “Advanced Spanish Composition,” which was a required course for all Spanish minors and majors at that time. I was looking for in-depth student input on revision of the course syllabus, goals and learning outcomes, course assignments, as well as the selection of the most appropriate textbook. Throughout the years, I had modified the course considerably based primarily on my personal observations and student feedback. Students’ final and mid-semester course evaluations, as well as focus-groups conducted by CATL, Elon University’s Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, had been extremely helpful in understanding students’ expectations in the course and their overall response to it.

Thinking that more in-depth feedback from students would be beneficial, as well as wanting to engage students in the process of course design to improve their learning, I decided to work with students on various aspects of the course. While I wanted to invite student voices, I did not want to silence my own voice in this process, but rather engage in dialogue with them and create a space in which a more egalitarian relationship could be cultivated between us. I also was curious to know if students would be willing and capable of contributing meaningful insights to the overall design of the course, as well as see how this collaboration would alter my students’ and my perception of the teaching and learning process and our respective roles in it and in relation to each other.

Research shows that student-faculty partnership on teaching and learning is rooted in the pedagogy that truly aims to be democratic (Manor et al., 2010; Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011). Manor et al. (2010) argue that power dynamics are the core of our (western) higher education system. Both the relationship established between the professors and the students and the physical space used to carry out this relationship are hierarchical. Teachers are the figures with almost total authority in the classroom, while students either of secondary or no authority at all (p. 10). Unfortunately, the established model based on such hierarchy, even when the hierarchy is seen as temporary, creates several profound problems that prevent students from thinking in a democratic way. First and foremost, the model discourages active participation of students in the process of their education—a characteristic that undoubtedly is an important attribute of a

democratic society or democratically minded individual. Manor et al. (2010) make a strong point that power and responsibility are interconnected, and where there is power there is more responsibility, while lack of power leads to less or no responsibility: “The students’ perceived powerlessness in their own education translates into a lack of their taking responsibility for their own education” (p. 10).

Cook-Sather & Alter (2011), also capitalizing on the increased responsibility that it places on students, argue that student-faculty partnership offers us an opportunity to democratize education (p. 50). The authors argue that what the collaboration between students and teachers brings into play is “a more democratic dialogue—[...] making spaces for such dialogue within which faculty and students contemplate together how learning is or could be happening in college classrooms” (p. 50). Once we open up to the possibility of listening to others, once we enter into dialogue, the process becomes ongoing. The dialogue itself becomes transformative, placing both teachers and students in a “liminal” space; a space that is reciprocal, where teaching and learning is co-conceptualized and co-constructed (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011, p. 51).

With all of this in mind, I invited three of my former students to collaborate on course redesign. I decided from the very beginning that it was paramount that I invite former and not current students to collaborate because I strongly believed that the partnership would not succeed unless some sort of equality (at least, when it came to power relationships that exist between teachers and students) was established and such equality would be hard if not impossible to achieve if I worked with my current students. While I am not implying that power ever fully disappears in the relationship between faculty and students, I do think that student-faculty partnership attempts to and ultimately aims to equalize this relationship. I chose students based on the following: I already knew these students; they had taken the course with me during previous year; they exhibited diverse linguistic proficiency in order to address the differences that exist in the level of students’ preparedness in the advanced language course I was planning to redesign; and they had shown dedication to and engagement with the language learning. These were all undergraduate level, but not all “A” students. Rather, they were students with diverse levels of knowledge who shared equal interest for the subject. Students were told in advance that the project would require a semester-long commitment with individual and group work of approximately 20 hours. Students were also promised a stipend of \$200 upon the completion of the project.

Inviting students whom I already knew was comforting, on the one hand, because I felt that we had already developed a respectful and trusting relationship with each other, but, on the other hand was unnerving, because these students had taken the course in question and, in the process of redesign, would be unavoidably criticizing some aspects of it. Quite frankly, I was scared. But I decided to take this step thinking that even if I had to listen to a lot of criticism, these were students whom I respected and who respected me, students who had agreed to engage in this partnership because of their dedication to the subject I taught and with the sincere desire to contribute to the process of improving our teaching and learning experiences. Through the process, I discovered that this very dedication to and engagement with the subject matter coming from the students was one of the most important reasons for the success of this partnership.

I organized the process of the project in the following manner: Students were to a) reflect upon their initial expectations of the course and how they were or were not met; b) look at the syllabus of the course and rewrite the course objectives based on their needs and expectations; c) align the existing activities of the course (tests, projects, presentations, class discussions, grammar workshops, etc.) with the newly written (or rewritten) course objectives; d) add/eliminate activities when/if necessary, as well as adjust grade distribution for each activity; and e) think of an ideal textbook for newly redesigned course. For this final assignment, students wrote a list of components that an ideal textbook was to contain. I created a rubric based on their lists and after this, students evaluated six different textbooks and chose the one that met most of their expectations.

Table 1 provides the description of some of the changes made to the course with comments and reflections from students and faculty.

Table 1

Advanced Spanish Composition	
Change/contribution	Comments from faculty and student partners
Learn about history, civilization, and diverse literary authors of Spanish-speaking societies.	<p>Student partners suggested to structure the course based on historical and literary content in order to focus more on different authors and texts (cultural, historical, and literary) of the Hispanic societies. For example, survey of Spanish-American civilization, history, literature, etc.</p> <p>It was surprising to me to learn that student partners' primary goals were to learn about the Spanish-speaking world while developing their linguistic proficiency. One student said: "[In my AP Spanish class] we went by culture and by country so [...] through each unit we would do grammar and vocab and like you know do reading from that culture" (Student #2). While I didn't share students' opinion about the pedagogical soundness of a survey course, I did agree that my courses had to incorporate more cultural content. It is important to note that this particular suggestion of students fostered a fundamental change to the entire Spanish curriculum. Currently, the Spanish curriculum is highly content focused and incorporates the development of students' linguistic proficiency, cultural competency and critical thinking through their exposure to the texts of different genres and historical circumstances that have forged Spanish and Spanish-American culture. We don't have courses titled "Advanced Spanish Composition" any more, but rather ones that are titled "US-Spanish-American Relations," "Socio-political Conflicts in the 20th Century," "Race, Gender and Identity in Spain," etc. We focus on content while simultaneously addressing linguistic proficiency. This change came mainly following student partners' suggestions on placing more emphasis on cultural competence. (Faculty)</p>
Improve students' knowledge of	Student partners pointed out that the course did and should focus on developing their writing skills and on giving them effective writing

<p>Spanish writing style through reading of original texts and extensive writing projects.</p>	<p>tools, but through the reading of original texts of varied genres and styles.</p> <p>Students also pointed out the importance of reading, as well as seeing the interdependence of reading and writing. One student wrote: “Through reading, I feel like I gained an understanding of how the Spanish language is composed that I could transfer to my writing.” (Student #1)</p> <p>Working on course expectations, objectives and requirements, as well as on the rubric for textbook selection, I was surprised at how much student partners’ opinions matched mine. Speaking about their initial expectations, student partners indicated that they were looking for developing written, compositional skills; improving their understanding of grammar and structures; and in general, reading and writing a lot. They noted that the course should help them acquire a much better understanding of typical sentence style, as well as the structure of essays and the knowledge of effective writing tools in the target language; the reading material should expose them to a variety of writing styles, as well as a variety of culturally relevant content. (Faculty)</p>
<p>Quizzes (vocabulary and grammar) Reading comprehension and analysis</p>	<p>Based on the feedback from student partners there will be as much focus on testing students’ reading comprehension and analysis skills in the quizzes and exams as the knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical accuracy.</p> <p>Students noted that the quizzes should “test the knowledge of Hispanic societies” (Student #1); “Have reading quizzes” (Student #2).</p>
<p>The instruction of grammar</p>	<p>Since students’ linguistic proficiency varies dramatically, their goals for the course were also different. Those who came to the course with more advanced level of proficiency considered doing grammatical exercises “boring” and “useless” (Student #3), while for those with less proficiency these activities were essential. We tried to reach a compromise by giving students a choice between completing the grammar exercises and writing an essay. In the future, students would have to consult with the instructor regarding the topic of the essay or the activities of the grammar workbook in order to address their personal weaknesses and/or interests.</p>

Opportunities

Based on their reflections, student partners were highly engaged in the process of course redesign. As I indicated in the beginning, one of my main goals was to learn about students’ perspectives on the goals and the meaning of partnering with a faculty on a teaching and learning

related project. I conducted an initial survey to hear what students wanted to gain from this collaboration, as well as what they had to contribute to the process. According to the results of the survey, students wanted to:

- a. Learn what went into designing a course;
- b. Learn more about the particular subject of the course they were asked to redesign;
- c. Learn about teaching and develop pedagogical skills.

One of the student partners wrote: “I feel invested in the Spanish program [...] I am interested to learn how studies are conducted, [as well as other] important aspects of collaboration” (Student #1).

All of the students indicated gaining new insight into the teaching and learning process as a result of their participation. By the end of the project they wrote:

“[I]t kind of reminded me of how much goes into making a course obviously because when you’re in a class you say why is the teacher doing this? This seems so irrelevant, stuff like that. But it’s all tied together.” (Student #3)

“I definitely realized it’s a lot more complicated than I thought. Creating a syllabus from scratch would be one of the most difficult things I could think of. Just even changing what we already had was difficult and it was already based off of a course, so I respect the professors for that.” (Student #1)

“So I realize more what the purpose of like the college writing course and the Spanish composition course were. I realized that they were helping me to develop my writing skills in these respective languages and that they were helping me to communicate effectively through writing.” (Student #2).

Although students did not anticipate this, their follow-up reflections highlighted the ways the project made both parties rethink the traditional hierarchical relationship between teachers and students:

It didn't seem like any sort of hierarchy existed. It just seemed like we were two groups on the same team, so maybe like she was the offensive and we were the defensive or something and we just had to collaborate. [...] Being willing to work together on the same level is crucial I think so that you're not missing any feedback that students might be intimidated to give. (Student #1)

[W]e did work mostly on the basis of our student-teacher relationship from last semester, but we also had more of a friendly relationship in the nature of the group setting. We did a lot of our group meetings, for example, at Irazu coffee shop rather than in a classroom or in the office. I feel like that gave us more of a friendly like, a friendly ambiance during these meetings and more open communication. (Student #2)

[...] I think we all kind of had equal roles. [...] I felt more of partners I guess. I mean I never felt like she was like I'm the teacher or this is what we're doing. She always really wanted to hear what, I mean obviously she wanted to hear what we all had to say and

was very interested in our feedback and asked can I have a copy of your notes, this is all really helpful? [...] So I never felt like, I felt like we were all working on this together. (Student #3)

Students also overwhelmingly agreed that more of these kinds of projects would be beneficial.

I think it's very important to get the feedback of the students in this way and it was nice to see that it's kind of really going to make a difference and I think that that's very important to always keep growing and changing. (Student #1)

[I]n an ideal world, I would love for all of the students in any regard to see how the syllabus is designed, that it really is designed with the students' best objectives in mind. And I think students kind of lose track of that a lot. (Student #2)

I think it's interesting that it's a project that's going on with the students. I think it's great that as students we have the option of getting involved and having like impacting something. I mean in a bigger school, I know that this would never really happen. It would just be the teachers talking and figuring out what to do with the course so I think it's really important that the students have a say in changing the course for the better basically based on their experience. (Student #3)

Risks and Vulnerabilities

As I was starting the project of redesigning a course with student partners, my initial question and fear was: considering the fact that student-faculty partnership on teaching and learning is not a common or frequently referred to practice yet, how vulnerable will I be when I try to experiment with it? It is hard to ignore or overcome the existing power dynamic between faculty and students and the role that authority has in our current educational model. My initial fear with the project was making myself vulnerable, as students would criticize certain aspects of the course that had taken so much time and commitment from me to develop. I was afraid that students would interpret the invitation to collaborate on course design as a sign of insecurity and lack of experience and knowledge. As I mentioned earlier, it was scary to put myself in such a vulnerable position vis-à-vis students who often equate vulnerability with weakness. After all, I was their teacher incapable of making necessary changes on her own? Didn't she have enough practical and theoretical experience to design a course?

What gave me confidence was having taught the students involved in the project and having already developed mutual respect. It was absolutely crucial in making this project work for both sides. While we maintained the respect for each other, students started to see me as a 'partner' and a 'friend.' The project did destabilize the hierarchy, but didn't necessarily erase the mutual respect that is vital in faculty-student partnerships. In other words, inviting students as partners to co-design a course with me didn't in any way diminish the respect that they had for me and, on the other hand, reinforced the understanding that I respected and valued their opinions and standpoints and was willing to learn from them. As students' comments above showed, they

were appreciative of the fact that the project forced all of us to occupy an equal role and see each other as partners, sharing responsibilities for teaching and learning equally.

I think that involving students as partners in teaching and learning should not be only about improving one's teaching; it should also be about improving learning, i.e. helping students develop a better understanding of what teaching entails and, hoping that by involving them in the design and development of course and/or curriculum components, they will become more engaged, more invested learners and, consequently, change their attitude towards the process of learning, viewing it as an equal responsibility of both teachers and students. Research has undoubtedly shown that involving students in the process of pedagogical decision-making improves their engagement and makes them take more responsibility towards their education (Cook-Sather & Abbot, 2016; Manor et al., 2010; Werder et al., 2012). My experience partnering with students certainly showed me how little students knew about the process of making pedagogical decisions when designing a course and how much more appreciative of this work they were after completing the project. Nonetheless, it also showed me that students thought of their task as one that was to improve teaching, not necessarily learning. They didn't always see this partnership as an opportunity to develop a new perspective about themselves as learners nor an opportunity to establish equal, nonhierarchical relationship between them and faculty. For example, in their final reflections couple of students wrote:

I did recognize as a student that the composition course that I completed last semester was a bit disjointed, and obviously I wasn't the only one that felt that way. [...] I don't really know necessarily what other courses need this sort of restructuring. In which case, maybe it would be a waste of time if all courses had to be redesigned by students, potentially. (Student #2)

I'm sure that there are other departments at this school that could use some help as well. I think it's definitely beneficial because you know if there were, in chemistry, like my class personally, there were so many things were he was like oh you don't really need to learn but it's really interesting and I think it's cool, so. And he would go in for 20 min in class about it and meanwhile we didn't get to the 3 chapters that we needed. So kind of shaping it and re-directing it, because I think maybe it's gone off track a little bit. (Student #3)

Students' comments in this case point at how vulnerable a professor might be in a situation in which students see their invitation to collaborate as a 'cry for help' and assume a certain air of superiority that is not necessarily intentional, but rather subconscious. These comments, even if accompanied by others that seemed more reflective and positive, made me think of certain aspects of student-faculty partnerships that would need to be addressed beforehand: primarily, having a deliberate and constant dialogue between faculty and students about the reasons of partnership and our individual roles in it.

These comments of student partners point to the importance of considering the following issues that seem to be the by-products of the educational model that is currently in place: the existing power dynamics between faculty and students and the role that authority actually has in our current educational model and the importance of laying the groundwork for partnership and

doing it systematically with regular discussion about its pedagogical merit and value of partnership and collaboration.

I fear that for many faculty apprehensive of engaging in partnership with students to co-design teaching and learning, this is also the case: invitation to partner on course (re)design tends to be understood as an acknowledgement of faculty's imperfection, as the questioning of their expertise. So, I believe that it is up to those who have experience with student-faculty partnership to stress that pedagogical partnerships are supposed to enhance student learning experiences by developing awareness of their identities as learners and of the dialogical nature of teaching and learning. I also believe that addressing these issues directly with students can be helpful in overcoming some of the fears as well as the misconceptions about pedagogical partnership. In hindsight, I wish I had had more honest and lengthy conversations with students not only about my own fears, but also about what my expectations of partnership were in terms of destabilizing our preconceived roles and identities as teachers and learners.

When considering whether to collaborate with students on course, assignment, or curricular design and on the issues of teaching and learning in general, it is important to be clear from the very start about the reasons for which one partners. My personal experience has proven to me that if students and faculty think that collaboration is set up solely to improve teaching, their attitude might prevent genuine partnership from developing. The initial intent to partner, i.e. treat each other as equals, is skewed from the start. So, it is my belief that neither faculty nor students should think of the partnership process as faculty's desire to improve their teaching, but instead, as a way of helping students develop a better understanding of the pedagogical choices made when creating an assignment, a course, or a curriculum. Both, faculty and students should be thinking of this type of collaboration as an educational experience for students and faculty, an experience that will foster their engagement with and understanding of the subject and promote a higher education system that is based on more democratic and egalitarian principles.

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